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FM AMEMBASSY LUANDA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5443  
INFO RUCNSAD/SOUTHERN AF DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LUANDA 000257

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/16/2019  
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SUBJECT: ELECTIONS IN 2009 UNLIKELY

(U) Classified by Charge Jeff Hawkins, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Staffdel Marsh's conversations with parliamentary, ruling party, and opposition figures suggest presidential elections in 2009 are highly unlikely. Constitutional reform, which President dos Santos has said must precede these elections, is progressing slowly, with even the most optimistic scenarios calling for several more months of drafting and public consultations. The MPLA's Secretary General implied his party may currently favor direct elections, although UNITA President Samakuva believes the President has already decided on indirect elections. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Senior Professional Staff Member of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Dr. Pearl-Alice Marsh visited Angola April 9-12. During her visit, she had a series of conversations regarding the constitutional revision process and prospects for elections. Post will report other elements of her visit septel.

¶3. (C) In a meeting with Dr. Marsh and Charge, acting President of the National Assembly Joana Lima Ramos stressed revision of the constitution would have to precede elections. She said that Angola's parliamentary leadership sought an inclusive process, one that brought in the opposition and the Angolan people. The National Assembly Commission charged with revising the constitution had been widened to include all five parliamentary groups (MPLA - 35 members, UNITA - 6 members, PRS - 2 members, FNLA - 1 member, Nova Democracia - 1 member). Each of these parties was currently in the process of preparing its own proposal for revision of the constitution. These proposals are due on May 31. At the same time, the National Assembly was receiving proposals from the general public. Following the deadline, the Commission will reconcile these proposals and then begin a series of public discussions on the constitution. Ramos was unable to guess how long this process would take, saying only that the "timeframe will be defined by the work to be done." When pressed, she opined that the process "definitely wouldn't take as long as two years."

¶4. (C) In a subsequent meeting, MPLA Secretary General Dino Matross was unequivocal about prospects for elections in ¶2009. "Essentially impossible this year," he said. Secretary for International Affairs Paolo Jorge, presumably more attuned to his international audience, interrupted the Secretary General to say that elections were "not likely" in ¶2009. Like Ramos, Matross stressed the importance of completing the constitutional revision process prior to elections. Matross thought the National Assembly Commission working on the revisions would have a draft in August or September, after which some two or three months of public discussion would follow. Charge noted that the MPLA had just announced that its party congress would take place in December, which presumably meant that the party would not designate its presidential candidate until then. Matross confirmed that was the case.

¶5. (C) Interestingly, Matross suggested that the MPLA might

favor direct elections. (Note: There has been considerable debate, apparently even within the MPLA, regarding whether elections should be direct or indirect.) He said the MPLA was currently considering the South African, French, Portuguese, and American models and that no final decision had been made. Matross noted, however, that the party's last proposal for constitutional revision, set aside after parliamentary elections last year, incorporated direct elections.

¶6. (C) In a discussion over breakfast at the Charge's residence, UNITA President Isaias Samakuva bemoaned the connection between elections and completion of constitutional revisions and complained that the National Assembly was seriously behind schedule in the revision process. Samakuva said the President's insistence the constitution be revised before elections took place was "not what was promised" and that he didn't understand "why they are now linked." UNITA had been willing to accept initial delays in deadlines for submission of drafts by the various parliamentary groups, Samakuva said, but the work was going very slowly. Samakuva was sure there would be no presidential elections this year, and was uncertain about prospects for elections in 2010. In accordance with UNITA's constitution, which designates the party president as UNITA's presidential candidate, Samakuva said, "if elections take place, I'm the candidate."

¶7. (C) Samakuva was convinced the new constitution would provide for indirect elections. "The linkage of the revision of the constitution to the elections can only be justified by the President's desire to see the method of elections changed," he insisted. Samakuva believed that President dos

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Santos was determined to have indirect elections but that there was opposition to this approach on the part of some MPLA leaders. Samakuva suggested one possible explanation for dos Santos' interest in indirect elections was that he was buying time to groom a successor. Indirect elections would obviously favor the new MPLA candidate, given the party's overwhelming parliamentary majority, and leave dos Santos in control of the process. When pressed on who that new candidate might be, Samakuva mentioned National Assembly President (and former PM) Fernando da Piedade Dias dos Santos, aka "Nando," as a strong possibility. Within UNITA, Samakuva said, there was debate about whether Angola should have a presidential or semi-presidential system. Some argued that Angola needed a strong executive, others that a prime minister would help counterbalance the weight of a dos Santos presidency.

¶8. (C) Comment. Given these and other discussions, the chances of Angola holding presidential elections this year are slim. At this point, we do not share Samakuva's conviction that elections will be indirect. The MPLA's public messages on the issue are mixed, and it is entirely possible that dos Santos - if he plans to run - seeks the legitimacy that direct elections would confer. Our democracy and governance assistance strategy for FY09 focuses on elements - civil society, free media, parliament - that can help level the playing field for elections in 2010 or thereafter. End Comment.

HAWKINS